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厦门大学

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20 世纪 60 年代以来美国印度裔离散文学的  
主题关注

Thematic Concerns in Indian American Diasporic  
Literature since the 1960s

李东风

指导教师姓名: 张龙海 教授

专 业 名 称: 英语语言文学

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评阅人: 史志康 陈世丹

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1970s, a wave of diaspora scholarship has swept the Western intellectual circle. Diaspora is a concept formulated with the mass transnational migration and globalization in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has created a peculiar form of population dispersion which has challenged such postcolonial relationships as the centre and the periphery, the mainstream and the subaltern, as well as home and abroad.

Following the popularity of the word “diaspora” in the academic circle, diasporic literature becomes a hot issue in literary studies across the world. Many influential literary critics throughout the world, such as William Safran, Clark Blaise and Monika Fludernik, have all attempted to give definitions to diasporic literature and criterions for this genre. What’s more, its association with nationalism, transnationalism, race, ethnicity and gender has made it a focus of critical attention in the contemporary literary critical circle.

In line with the sharp increase of Indian diasporic population in America since the 1960s, when the US government lifted its severe immigration restriction on Asian population, Indian American diasporic literature has been emerging as an important branch of Asian American literature, and has attracted more and more critical attention across the globe. In recent years, Indian American diasporic writers have been gaining recognitions from the reading public as well as the academic circles in America and throughout the world, with an ever growing number of Indian American works included in various anthologies and university syllabi, and an ever-growing number of Indian American diasporic writers, such as Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, gradually appearing on the American literary scene. Their literary works invariably gives truthful reflections on Indian diasporic life and experiences in the Western world.

Although there are Indian American critics like Kaavya Viswanathan,<sup>①</sup> who openly deny the existence of an Indian American community and literature, it is evident that more Indian American writers hold a contrary attitude with more and more characters under their pen starting to cherish and assert their ethnic identity and cultures. For them, this is a way to gain self-esteem and define their identity in an ethnically diverse society as the United States. Such a cultural stance can be attributed to their negotiation of cultural transnationalism between India and the United States, namely, their involvement with both countries in culture. And this open-ended attitude toward their cultural identity construction provides Indian American diasporic writers a critical space not only for cultural clashes, but also for exchanges of languages and discourses. They are trying to create a literary tradition of their own, a tradition not only closely related to that of their adoptive country and their ancestral country, but also closely related to their experiences of migration, displacement, and life in a minority group in the United States.

Indian American diasporic writers of international prestige are Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Those lesser well known than them but whose reputation is steadily on the rise include Chitra Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Kirin Narayan and so forth. In their creations, these writers share some common thematic concerns, such as Orientalist observation of India in the Western intellectual circle, the emotional experience of Indian diasporas, the difficulties involved in assimilation and social acceptance for ethnic groups in America, the racist hatred prevalent in the US, the exotic treatment of Indian cultures in the American mainstream society. Unique Indian cultures as culinary culture, caste system and traditional social practices represented by arranged marriages are also presented in their writing.

However, up to now, no critics in the world have conducted a holistic study on Indian American diasporic writing according to my knowledge. Most critics in this field just limit their researches on one of Indian American diasporic writers or several

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<sup>①</sup> See “Tanuja Desai Hidieer on *Born Confused* and *Opal Mehta*” by Tanuja Desai Hidier at [http://www.desiclub.com/community/culture/culture\\_article.cfm?id=265](http://www.desiclub.com/community/culture/culture_article.cfm?id=265).

of his/ her works. Therefore, it is regretful that we can barely see a whole picture of the development of the genre. This is the reason behind the initiation of the present project, which will give a detailed analysis on common themes of the Indian American diasporic literature, and to predict the direction of its future development.

Chapter 1 is a meditation on culinary treatments in Indian American diasporic writing. Many American writers, such as Frank Chin, have categorized those who intentionally include food descriptions in their creations as “food pornographers.” However, it may be an oversimplification for them to categorize all the alimentary renderings in Asian American literature as “food pornography.” By examining special roles that food plays in Indian American diasporic writing, I argue that to look at the use of food in Indian American literature as a kind of “food pornography” is a kind of cultural hegemony.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation elaborates on the Indian American diasporic writers’ efforts in locating a “true” national identity for Indian diasporas in the United States. By examining three tackling strategies used by them in a culturally alien milieu— nostalgia, name shift and mimicry, I argue that the formation and construction of national identity for Indian Americans diasporas is not a static process, but a dynamic one. It involves neither an absolute ethnic nationalism nor a complete assimilation, but an interaction between them. Hence, “double consciousness” is a key term in defining their national identity. The liminal state is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gives them conveniences in crossing cultural barriers; on the other, it brings them an identity crisis. In other words, they may belong to both cultures; but meanwhile, they may belong to neither.

Chapter 3 illustrates how cultural hybridity has influenced Indian American diasporas’ life significantly in the postcolonial world. It traces the etymological development of the word “hybridity” and points out that although the word has a derogative meaning in the colonial era, it begins to derive positive connotations in the latter half of the twentieth century under the influence of transnational movements and globalization. Cultural hybridity renders diasporas capable of interpreting the world from the perspectives of both the colonizers and the colonialized, thus creating

a threat to the authoritative discourse of the mainstream society and gaining more say for the subalterns in the postcolonial era. One factor that gives Indian American diasporic writers credit is the inclusion of cultural hybridity in their works. They all celebrate hybridized identities for their protagonists. By maintaining hybridized selves for themselves, these characters invariably serve as the cultural translators between U.S. and India.

Chapter 4 provides a systematic analysis of diasporic home narratives in Indian American diasporic writing. Home is an issue frequently discussed in postcolonial narrative discourse, and for Indian American diasporic writers, it remains a key idea both politically and culturally. By exploring various manifestations of diasporic homemaking in autobiographies, short stories and fictions by Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee, the chapter shows that the real sense of home for Indian American diasporas lies neither in ancestral land nor in adoptive land, but in their construction of distinct Indian American diasporic communities.

In the concluding part, I give a summary of the main content of the dissertation, point out the contribution and significance of the project, and use Bharati Mukherjee's comment "Indo-American literature is a new phenomenon and as yet only in the process of becoming a tradition" to infer that as time goes on, Indian American diasporic writers will surely expand the parameter of their writing one day in the future.

**Key Words:** Indian American diasporic writing; culinary culture; identity construction; cultural hybridity; home narratives

## 摘 要

上世纪 70 年代以来,西方学术界掀起了一股研究离散文学的热潮。离散是随着 20 世纪后半期全球化和大规模移民浪潮而出现的一个概念。它挑战了后殖民话语中中心和边缘、主流与分支、国内和国外等二元对立的观念。这一词汇在学术界受到广泛关注后衍生出一种全新的文学式样,即离散文学。它与民族主义、跨国主义、种族、性别等概念的紧密联系使之成为当代文学评论界关注的焦点。众多世界知名的文学评论家如威廉·塞弗仑、克拉克·布雷兹、莫妮卡·弗拉德尼克等都曾给离散文学下过定义,并就其界定谈过自己的看法。

上世纪 60 年代后,由于美国政府放松了对亚洲移民配额的限制,美国的印度裔移民数量激增,美国印度裔离散作家在美国亚裔文学中的影响也不断扩大,越来越多的印度裔作家开始及其作品在美国文坛上崭露头角,出现在各种文学选集和大学的授课计划中。他们的作品对印度裔移民在西方国家的离散生活经历做了细致而真实的描述。尽管有不少评论家仍然否认美国印度裔文学这一概念的存在,这一全新文学式样的产生和发展确实不争的事实。越来越多的印度裔作家开始让自己笔下的人物关注族裔属性和民族文化等问题。在他们看来,这是印度裔离散族群在美国这样一个多元文化并存的国度寻找文化存在感的最重要的方式之一。他们在印度和美国两种文化身份之间来回转换,以一种开放式的态度建构自己的文化属性。而这种开放式的态度使他们得以用一种高屋建瓴的视野审视两种文化间的冲突、交流与融合,进而确立了自己的文学传统。

在美国印度裔离散作家群体中,撒尔曼·拉什迪、巴拉蒂·穆克吉和茱帕·拉希莉已经在国际上享有一定声誉,近年来涌现出来的奇塔·蒂瓦卡鲁尼、米娜·亚历山大和金琳·娜拉扬也逐渐获得读者和评论家的认可。这些作家在创作中有着一些共同的主题,如美国知识界对印度的东方主义观察、印度离散人群的心理及情感经历、充斥美国社会的种族主义仇恨、美国主流社会对印度文化的色情化



解读，以及印度社会特有的饮食文化、种姓制度和包办婚姻等文化习俗。

然而，到目前为止，尚未有学者对美国印度裔离散文学的主题意蕴和写作技巧做过整体性研究。多数评论家将研究局限在其感兴趣的某一个作家的一部或几部作品上。本研究力图通过对美国印度裔离散文学创作主题的全景式展现来弥补这一缺憾，并对其发展做出前瞻性预测。

论文第一章讨论了饮食文化在美国印度裔离散文学中占有的地位。以赵健秀为代表的众多美国亚裔作家将美国少数族裔文学作品出现的独具民族特色的饮食文化称为“食物色情”。然而将所有少数族裔作品中出现的食物描写都归为“食物色情”却未免有失偏颇。饮食文化在美国印度裔离散文学中占有特殊的地位，具有多重意义。赵健秀等人的简单归类从某种角度上来说是一种文化霸权。

第二章通过审视美国印度裔离散作家的作品，讨论印度裔离散移民的身份建构问题。美国印度裔离散移民通常使用怀旧、换名和模仿等策略应对陌生文化环境带来的身份危机。然而，对于离散人群来说，身份的建构既非完全的“异化”亦非完全的“归化”，而是存在于“双重意识”之中。这种意识是一把双刃剑，既给人带来一定的归属感，有时也给人带来无家可归之感。

第三章着重表现文化混杂对美国印度裔离散人群生活的影响。通过追溯“混杂”词义的历史演变指出尽管在殖民时代这是一个带有贬义的词汇，然而在后殖民时代它却逐渐衍生出褒义的内涵。“混杂”业已成为离散人群对抗殖民思维，从全新的视角阐释世界的有力武器。本章从文化混杂的角度解读了四部美国印度裔离散作家的作品。

第四章系统阐释了美国印度裔离散文学中的“家叙事”。“家”是后殖民叙事话语中的普遍母题。本章讨论了这一主题对美国印度裔作家的政治和文化意义。通过分析茱帕·拉希莉、米娜·亚历山大等作家的作品，指出印度裔离散族群的“家”既非母国亦非美国，而是美国的印度裔离散社区。

结论部分总结前文所述内容，指出本研究的贡献和意义，并引用巴拉蒂·穆克吉的话“美国印度裔文学是全新的文学现象，但却渐成传统”来说明随着时间的推移，美国印度裔离散作家的写作视野必将进一步扩大，主题关注也将越来越多样化。

关 键 词：美国印度裔离散文学；饮食文化；身份建构；文化混杂；“家”叙事

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